

CARIBBEAN LITERATURE FROM THE ABC-ISLANDS IN THE EUROPEAN NETHERLANDS

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Introduction

Caribbean literature from the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao can be divided into two main components: literature written in Dutch and literature written in Papiamentu. Papiamentu is an Iberian-lexifier creole language spoken on the ABC-islands (the former Dutch Leeward Islands) and in the Netherlands. In this article, I will deal with Caribbean literature from the ABC-islands in both Dutch and Papiamentu during the last twenty-five years. My main aim is to situate this literature in its social, historical and political context and to provide an analysis of some of the constraints which are currently working against the growth of Caribbean literature from the ABC-islands in the European Netherlands.

Changing climate

One of our most respected Caribbean writers is Nicolaas Cola Debrot², who actually laid the foundation for Antillean prose in Dutch. His essays, articles and visionary statements set Caribbean literature from the ABC-islands on solid ground. With his novel *My black sister* (1935) he wanted his readers to reflect on a new reality. By the 1970s, with the advent of writers such as Frank Martinus Arion, Boeli van Leeuwen (1922-2007) and Tip Marugg (1923 -2006) it seemed that Caribbean literature from the ABC-islands had acquired a permanent place in Dutch literature. Van Leeuwen won the *De Vijverbergprijs* in 1961, Marugg was nominated in 1986 for the most prestigious AKO literature prize, and Arion won the prestigious *C.W. van der Hoogtprijs* in 1973³. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the work of these Caribbean authors was widely discussed in the media. In the early 1970s Caribbean literature was still quite popular in the Netherlands, where readers were quite familiar with novels such as Arion's *Dubbelspel* [Double Play] (1972).

² The Bonairian writer Cola Debrot published *Mijn zuster de negerin* [My black sister] in 1935. The topics covered in this book were the taboo issues of black vs. white and rich vs. poor. It was translated into Papiamentu [Mi Negrita, mi ruman] in 2008, after it already have been translated in English and Spanish.

³ Nowadays De Vijverberg Literature prize is called the Ferdinand Borderwijk prize. F.M. Arion also won the Cola Debrot-prize for his novel *De laatste vrijheid* [The Last Freedom] (1995).

But the popularity of Caribbean literature in the Netherlands did not last for long. In the 1980s a drastic change was underway. As the European unification process gained momentum, the media began to focus more on all things Dutch, including Dutch television programs, Dutch stand up comedians, etc.⁵ The music scene in the Netherlands was no longer dominated by British and American singers, but by Dutch pop music and the charts were constantly topped by Dutch hits. From that moment on, a process of revival of European Dutch culture and identity began. As for non-European writing in Dutch, from the 1990s onward we witness a shift in focus away from Caribbean writers and toward young immigrant writers in the Netherlands of Turkish and Moroccan descent. In the aftermath of the events of 9/11 interest in Moroccan and Turkish literature also declined, and now Scandinavian literature is widely read in the Netherlands.

Although there have been some attempts at diversification, the Dutch media remain largely segregated and dominated by Netherlanders of European descent. Only 12% of television presenters on public television networks are of African and Caribbean descent as opposed to 14% on commercial networks.⁶ These statistics illustrate that Dutch society is still a closed society, which is not open to non-European descended people participating in its media, art and cultural industries, which play a major role in the socialization of the Dutch population. Over time, television documentaries about third world countries have disappeared from the screen, to be replaced by Dutch soap operas and talkshows with mainly European Dutch presenters and guests. This process has unfolded while the Netherlands has been becoming more and more demographically diverse. During this period, issues relating to social and cultural clashes between European and non-European descended Netherlanders, school segregation, discrimination in hiring and at the workplace, exclusively European descended boards of directors in the private-sector, etc, have come more and more to the fore. Debates in the 1980s that focused on issues such as discrimination have shifted from the 1990s onward towards debates about all-sided racism in the Netherlands. Moreover, these debates have largely taken place between European descended Dutch intellectuals, with Caribbean intellectuals and organizations for the most part excluded. It seems that every four years the newly elected government dutifully introduces a new integration policy that is doomed to fail.

Historical context

After Suriname gained its independence in 1975, the Dutch government at the time believed that the six islands of the Netherlands Antilles would follow, but this did not come to pass, and since 1954, the islands have generally been internally self-governing

⁵ For example, soap-operas like *Medical Center-West*, *Goede tijden*, *Slechte tijden* and *Onderweg naar morgen*.

⁶ Monitor Diversity 2002.

while the government of the Netherlands handles their foreign policy and defense portfolios.⁹ In practice, however, intellectually and financially the islands remain dependent on the European Netherlands. This unequal relationship is one of the reasons why the Dutch still consider the islands to be semi-colonies, whose peoples are without culture, history or ambition, and approach their writers from that reference point.

Although the ties between the islands and the European Netherlands have in some cases become looser over time, all of the islands are still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to this day. Within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, education and culture have remained for the most part Eurocentric. Most schools in the ABC-islands still use Dutch as language of instruction and initial literacy. European Dutch materials, methods, tests etc. predominate. Caribbean literature and art are largely marginalized, or occupy narrow niche markets. In the final analysis, the Caribbean islands are considered to be a relatively insignificant part of the Kingdom. For example, F.M. Arion's *Dubbelspel* is placed at number 122 on the list of 125 titles selected for the Dutch literature canon.¹⁰

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the last 25 years have witnessed two important shifts: (1) Caribbean writers have begun to outnumber European expatriate writers as authors of prose and poetry about the ABC-islands; and (2) these authors from the ABC-islands are opting more and more to write and publish in Papiamentu instead of in Dutch. In particular after 1986 – with the acquisition of Aruba's new status as an autonomous country within the Kingdom – we observe a great increase in Caribbean authors and publications in Papiamentu. Over the last three decades, an average of about 75% of new titles in Aruba is written in Papiamentu (some 85% in the 1980s, some 66% in the 1990s, and some 75% in the new millennium).

While there has been an explosion of writing by Caribbean authors in Great Britain, the USA, France, Spain and Canada, over the past few decades, things have remained remarkably silent on the Dutch front. In recent years our literary history has been enriched with a variety of publications that provide important insight into literary development in the ABC-islands, including but not limited to: *Three Curaçaoon writers* (1991), *Pa saka kara* (1998), *Tropics language, 200 years of Antillian story telling* (2001), *Northeast transient, 400 years Dutch story-telling art about Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba* (2005) and *The bridge from Paramaribo to Willemstad* (2007). All these publications give us a sense of the state of Caribbean literature, its considerable achievements and the considerable challenges that it has yet to overcome.

⁹ In 1986 Aruba obtained the status of an autonomous country within the Dutch Kingdom, followed by Curaçao and St. Maarten in 2010. In 2010, Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius became special municipalities of The Netherlands.

¹⁰ The canon was instituted by the Dutch Literary Society.

Political Context

The political system in the Netherlands has been influenced for the past few decades by parties with right-wing sympathies and extremist ideas. From 1984 to 1998 the Centre Democrats focused on a nationalist ideology; from 2002 to 2006, the LPF (List Pim Fortuijn) fulminated against European regulation; and from 2006 to the present the anti-Muslim PVV (Freedom Party) has also adopted anti-EU positions. All of these populist parties are focused on single issues and have charismatic leaders who position themselves against the political establishment. They all invoke patriotism, and turn their back on everything that they do not consider to be Dutch, especially people of non-European descent within the Kingdom.

These tragic developments stem from intermittent periods of economic crisis, which have been exploited by xenophobic and anti-immigrant right wing demagogues, who have gained considerable support and political power across Europe: i.e. The Flemish Bloc in Belgium, Le Pen of the Front National in France, Nazi sympathiser Jörg Haider of the FPÖ in Austria and Nick Griffin of the British National party (BNP). Before this period, one of the cornerstones of Dutch politics was a process of integration, whereby all Dutch citizens of all backgrounds could find a place in a society with a cultural climate that was hospitable to non-European descended immigrant groups. The goal was the establishment of a tolerant society that would include non-European derived cultures and lifeways, which would have as one of its manifestations a lively arts scene, where artists of diverse backgrounds could participate in one another's activities. Before the 1990s, each immigrant group had its own community centers, publications and sponsored activities, but under the rule of the right, these have all been gradually phased out. Now, different groups such as the Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese, Antilleans, and Arubans are all living in physical proximity in the poorer areas of the Netherlands, but they no longer have any notion of each other's cultural and literary accomplishments. Over the past twenty-five years, the interests of immigrant groups with more electoral clout in the Netherlands have been pitted against immigrant groups with less clout, such as the Antilleans and Arubans.

In Dutch literary studies, distinctions are made between a number of ethnically defined subgenres, such as Antillean-, Surinamese-, Indian- and Arabic-Dutch literatures. The role of Antillean and Aruban authors in Caribbean-Dutch literature is somewhat peculiar, given that it is mainly writers who live on the Islands that publish in Dutch, such as Boeli van Leeuwen, Tip Marugg, Frank Martinus Arion, Erich Zielinski, Jacques Thönnissen. Meanwhile the much smaller group of authors who live in the Netherlands such as Denis Henriquez, Myrna Römer, Quito Nicolaas, Joan Leslie and Giselle Ecury includes poets who prefer to write in Papiamentu, rather than in Dutch. This can be seen in part to be a consequence of recent Dutch policies of ethnic

separation, which have prevented writers and artists from different ethnic communities from experiencing one another's cultural expressions as much they did before the rise of the right.

Currently, there are some initiatives afoot to help begin to remedy this situation. Annually the Caribbean Literature Working Group organizes events to kick off a new season. Then there are the biennial Cola Debrot-lectures with a literary theme and the Van Lier-lectures on a social scientific topic. A recent lecture by F. Guadeloupe with the title *Adieu to Coolies, Nikkers and Makambas: the deconstruction of racial thinking within Caribbean anthropology* made quite a critical impact. From 2009 onward the Bijlmerpark theater has been promoting more and more Afro-Caribbean theatre. In 2007 a Chair for Dutch Caribbean Literature was instituted at the University of Amsterdam. A Caribbean Arts Working Group is up and running. But Dutch Caribbean literature will never be accepted by large segments of the population of the European Netherlands as part of their literature until Caribbean and other immigrants are visible at all levels of society i.e. in public administration, foundations, directorships, businesses, schools, the media, Parliament, etc.

Narration/Themes

In the Netherlands the majority of immigrants are obliged to accept a low socio-economic position in the new society, and with migration often comes a loss of the traditions of storytelling and oral history that could be so worthwhile and inspiring for future generations of writers. In 2010 research was carried out amongst the Javanese-Surinamese population in the Netherlands to re-construct part of their history. Now a similar study is to be conducted amongst elderly Arubans and Antilleans in Dutch society. Both studies should stimulate our literary production.

Wim Rutgers (2007) identifies three defining periods in the development of Dutch Caribbean and Caribbean Dutch literature: 1) 1492 -1863: from discovery to emancipation; 2) 1863 -1954: from emancipation to autonomy; and 3) 1954 - present: from autonomy to self-determination. Rutgers also observes that since 1954 Caribbean born authors have been more creative than expatriate authors in terms of themes, content and style. While this may be true for the literature in Papiamentu, the novels in Dutch by Debrot, Marugg, Van Leeuwen and Arion were partially innovative in content and décor, but their style and characters were similar to those found in Dutch novels. The same can be said concerning Erich Zielinski's latest novel *Scott Zuyderling*. The explosion in literary creativity and innovation that followed the riots in Brixton, Brussels and Paris has no counterpart in Amsterdam, Oranjestad, Philipsburg or Willemstad. In Great Britain we saw *White teeth* (2000) appear and in France *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (1997) by Patrick Chamoiseau, both of which can be considered ground-breaking works for their time. For the moment,

however, Caribbean migrant literature in the Netherlands is still largely focused on the homeland.

Authors, cultures and their stories

Denis Henriquez

After the success of writers such as Arion, Marugg and Van Leeuwen, things remained somewhat quiet on the publishing front in the 1980s. But then, in the 1990s the novel *Zuidstraat* [Southstreet] appeared by the Aruban descended writer Denis Henriquez. As a migrant writer, he made us very aware of the then existing taboos in Aruba. What he did not do in his novels was to describe the experiences of immigrants, for example, during and after World War II.

Jacques Thönissen

Thönissen is a writer who uses different ritual and cultural patterns in Aruba as symbols to construct his stories. His characters are mostly second-generation immigrants who get themselves into trouble, but find their way out. Focusing on the experiences of immigrants from Santo Domingo, his second novel *De roep van de Troepiaal* (2004) [The call of the Oriole] features a Dominican woman who tries doing things her own way. An earnest, but not always convincing, political voice can be heard in the background of his stories. In his last novel *Devah* (2010) he decides to abandon the Caribbean and opts for a European setting instead.¹⁴

Clark Accord

In the novel *Bingo*, Clark Accord describes how a woman drags her daughter, a single mother, slowly into a life of gambling. By using the ideas of ‘culture of poverty’ and ‘poverty of culture’ he constructs a reality story. For those migrant families who lead a hopeless existence, gambling can be seen as a desperate attempt to bounce back. He also explores *hosselen* [hustling] or illegal strategies used by immigrants and other marginalized people to get by, but which do not necessarily provide viable solutions to their problems. Hence poverty reproduces itself from generation to generation.

Karin Amatmoekrim

While Amatmoekrim describes in her book *Wanneer wij samen zijn* [When we are together] the reunion of a Javanese family, in her latest novel *De gym* [The Gym] she deals with the two worlds of a migrant child: the economically depressed one to which she in fact belongs and the prosperous world that she wants to belong to. In the process, she invokes all of the contradictions that people encounter in daily life. For example, in the novel she includes an Afro-Caribbean descended child who has been

¹³ The other two novels Thönissen published was *Tranen om de ara* (1998) and *Eilandzigeuner* (2000).

adopted by rich parents and who acts like a European descended child. The novel gives an accurate depiction of what immigrant children experience at school.

Constraints: funds, publishing, and media

Of the large group of published Caribbean authors, there are only a few who belong to the mainstream. But whether their books are actually read by the mainstream public is another question. Books by Caribbean authors do not even appear on any of lists of the top 100 most read books over the past years, which means that they have sold less than 1.000 copies. Dutch author Annejet van der Zijl sold 221,158 copies of her novel *Sonny Boy* in 2011 and landed at No. 2 on the top 100, and Dutch writer Joost Zwagerman has sold 300,000 copies of *De Buitenvrouw* [The Outside Woman] (1994) over the years. Meanwhile, non-Dutch author Lawrence Hill's novel *The Negro* had sold fewer than 20,000 copies by 2012. In other words it is not so much the theme of the book that determines its success. It seems that the Dutch reading public prefers novels by European descended Dutch people with whom they can identify to novels by immigrant writers of Caribbean origin, although Dutch readers actually prefer to read novels in a foreign language i.e. English.

As does Great Britain's Arts Council of England, the Literary Fund in The Netherlands provides financial support to authors, but the criteria for obtaining these funds are designed in such a way that junior Caribbean writers are automatically excluded from consideration. A few already established senior Caribbean authors, however, have been awarded funds from this source to carry out particular writing projects.¹⁶ There are quite a number of publishing houses that are willing to publish Caribbean authors.¹⁸ These publishers are implementing a policy to create the impression that they are trying to prevent a process of ghetto-formation from taking place, thereby limiting the number of immigrant writers whose work they publish. Of course, publishing houses produce what the market demands and all kinds of criteria are taken into consideration before a decision is made as to whether to publish a book or not. It seems that publishing houses still prefer to publish novels that ridicule and stigmatize Caribbean people in general and Caribbean immigrants in particular, instead of novels relating to the experiences of Caribbean people in Dutch society. For example, the novel *Alleen maar nette mensen* [Only the neat people] by Robert Vuijsje caused much controversy in the Caribbean community a few years ago and won two Literature prizes: the Belgian Gouden Uil (Golden Owl) in 2009, and De Inkttaap in 2010.

¹⁶ For his novel *De Deserters* [The Deserters] in 2006, author F.M. Arion received a scholarship, while Myrna Römer got an incentive scholarship to write her novel *Het geheim van Garcia* [The Secret of Garcia] (2007).

¹⁸ In the Knipscheer, Prometheus, Contact, Atlas and De Bezige Bij.

There is also a growing number of independent writers who are self-publishing. One such group of writers – Simia Literario [Literary seed] – publishes predominantly in the Papiamentu language. Although their second anthology *Ta ken mi ta (2011)[Who I am]* bears a Papiamentu title, it contains prose and poetry in Papiamentu which is translated into Dutch. The dilemma that Antillean and Aruban writers constantly face when deciding whether or not to write in Papiamentu is that (1) one should publish in Papiamentu in order to contribute to literary development on the ABC-, (2) one should publish in Dutch in order to position oneself in the Netherlands and (3) one should publish in English, so one's voice might be heard across the Caribbean and beyond. Our Aruban, Curaçaoan and Surinamese writers desire to belong to the rich tradition of Papiamentu or Dutch literature, just as other Caribbean authors desire to belong to the British, American, French, or Spanish literary traditions. The questions that arise are: How European-Dutch are Aruban, Curaçaoan and Surinamese writers? How Dutch is their literature? and When are Caribbean writers going to develop their own prose, their own voices, regardless of the existing conventions that apply in Dutch literature?

After the journal *Watapana* in the 1960s and the *Sticusa-Journal* in the 1970s there was little in the way of literary magazines that focused on ABC-island literature. In the 1980s a few volumes of *Caribbean Forum* appeared before that publication folded as well. *Caribbean Forum* was directed towards the intellectual community. The journal was well intentioned, in the sense that it gave attention to the social-cultural and political-economic development of the Dutch Caribbean islands. A number of magazines published by immigrant welfare institutions also gave very sporadic attention to literature. The journals that were published on the islands, i.e. *Antilliaanse Cahiers*, *Ruku* and *Kristòf* and those published in The Netherlands i.e. *Watapana*, *Kontakto Antiyano*, *Plataforma* and *Caribbean Forum* never actually reinforced one other. It was as if they were being published in two different worlds, and only a small subgroup amongst their readers was really interested in literature. Today, the ILIS newsletter seems to have filled the void left by the demise of these publications to some extent, while the International Institute for Scientific Research gives courses about subjects such as colonialism and diaspora.

With the advent of the internet, five sites have emerged which provide information on a continuous basis about Caribbean literature: *Gedachten in Gedichten* (2007-2012), *Waves of Words* (2013), *Caribe Magazine* (2007), *Caribisch Uitzicht* (2009) and *Caribbean Literary Salon* (2010). *Gedachten in Gedichten* provides information in Papiamentu, Dutch and English. *Caribbean Literary Salon* is oriented toward the Caribbean islands, while *Caraibisch Uitzicht*, which contains essay and articles, and *Caribe Magazine*, which contains news, activities and book reviews, are aimed at a

Dutch audience. Besides these sites, Blaac Shop (2009) and BookIsh Plaza (2010) are the only webshops that sell Caribbean literature in various languages.

It was not until the 1970s that any radio programs in The Netherlands dedicated any attention to Antillean literature, and this consisted of nothing more than a few sporadic broadcasts. With the advent of the radio program *Tambu* in the early 1980s, much more attention was dedicated to current events on the Islands and Antillean organizations in Netherlands. In 2011 the Radio Netherlands began paying some belated attention to immigrant literature. In their daily programs, *Linea recta* and *Aki na Hulanda [Here in the Netherlands]*, several authors have been interviewed in Papiamentu and Dutch about their work.

Conclusion

On 1 August 2012, the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy was closed. Right wing governments have slashed support for immigrant arts and culture. Publishing houses and bookshops are closing down. Despite all of this Antillean and Aruban authors must continue to write our own stories, express our own views, and develop our own ideological perspectives. We also need to read each other's work. Within a few years – in 2020 – we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Caribbean literature in the Netherlands, and I hope that by that time we will have made some progress in surmounting the considerable obstacles that lay before us.

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